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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses total physical response storytelling (TPR-S) as a promising approach to teaching a Native American language to Native students who have not learned it at home. TPR-S is an extension of James Asher's TPR immersion approach to teaching second languages. It has become very popular with indigenous teachers because it allows students to be active learners, produces quick results, and does not involve the use of textbooks. After vocabulary has been learned using TPR, TPR-S strategies utilize that vocabulary by incorporating it into stories that students hear, act out, retell, read, and write. Subsequent stories introduce additional vocabulary in meaningful contexts. TPR-S is an interactive learner-centered process that keeps the stress of performing at a minimum and that makes use of the pedagogical strategies of scaffolding and cooperative learning. While TPR strategies develop only receptive language skills, TPR-S also promotes language production. TPR-S emphasizes a positive, collaborative, and supportive classroom climate in which Native children can develop increasingly complex skills in speaking, reading, and writing their tribal language. In addition, the stories, illustrations, and audio cassettes that students can produce in TPR-S are a valuable addition to the scarce pool of Native language materials available today. Contains 18 references. (Author/SV)

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Using TPR-Storytelling to Develop Fluency and Literacy in Native American Languages

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This paper describes the Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPR-S) approach to teaching second languages. TPR-S is an extension of James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) immersion approach to teaching second languages that has been very popular with indigenous language teachers as it allows students to be active learners, produces quick results, and does not involve the use of textbooks or writing. TPR-S strategies utilize vocabulary first taught using TPR by incorporating it into stories that students hear, watch, act out, retell, revise, read, write, and rewrite. Subsequent stories introduce additional vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Jon Allan
Reyhner

This paper discusses TPR-Storytelling (TPR-S) as a promising approach to teaching a Native American language to Native students who have not learned it at home. I am grateful to my former student Valeri Marsh for the opportunity to examine TPR-S training materials and strategies and for her input into this article.

An interest in exploring methodologies suitable for teaching indigenous languages and in having teachers receive training was expressed by the Native educators who met in Flagstaff, Arizona, at the First and Second Symposia on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages (Cantoni, 1996). Some of the participants gave demonstrations of the Total Physical Response (TPR) in their small-group meetings, and several teachers mentioned that TPR was used in their schools as an introductory approach to Native language instruction.

What is TPR?

Popularized in the 1960s and 70s by James Asher (1977), TPR represented a revolutionary departure from the audiolingual practice of having students repeat the teacher's utterances from the very beginning of their first lesson and whenever new material was introduced later on. Asher recommended that beginners be allowed a silent period in which they learn to recognize a large number of words without being expected to say them. The vocabulary presented at this level usually consists of action verbs and phrases such as "walk," "run," "touch," "point to," "give me," "go back," and the names of concrete items such as "floor," "window," "door," "mouth," "desk," "teddy bear," and "banana." About 150 words are presented in the first five or six weeks, and at least three new terms per lesson can be expected to become part of a learner's active vocabulary during any lesson, even though they may not say them until later.

The teacher begins by uttering a simple command such as "walk to the window," demonstrating or having a helper act out the expected action, and

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inviting the class to join in. Commands are usually addressed first to the entire class, then to small groups, and finally to individuals. When a few basic verbs and nouns have become familiar, variety is obtained by adding qualifiers such as "fast," "slowly," "big," "little," "red," "white," "my," and "your." Since the students are not required to speak, they are spared the stress of trying to produce unfamiliar sounds and the consequent fear of making mistakes. Stephen Krashen (1981) considers lowering the "affective filter" an important factor in the language acquisition process. Although the teacher is continuously assessing individual progress in order to control the pace of introducing new material, this assessment is unobtrusive and nonthreatening. A learner who does not understand a particular command can look at others for clues and will be ready to respond appropriately the next time or the one after.

TPR is a continuous application of the "scaffolding" strategy (Vygotsky, 1986) with the teacher, and then the class, supporting the learning of a new word by demonstrating its meaning and then withdrawing assistance when it is no longer needed. For example, to teach the word "gato" for "cat" the Spanish teacher may use a toy or a picture; later, the word "gato" becomes part of the scaffolding for teaching modifiers such as "big," "little," "black," or "white."

During TPR, the teacher is always providing comprehensible input, the cornerstone of Krashen's (1985) theory. New items are introduced within the framework of items taught in previous lessons or available from the learners' preexisting knowledge. In teaching the word "gato," the teacher is introducing a new label (an alternative to the label already available, i.e., "cat") but not a new concept—the learners are already able to identify the toy or the picture as representing a certain familiar creature.

TPR has been proven very effective for the initial stages of second language instruction, but it has limited usefulness for more advanced learning. It emphasizes commands, leaving out the forms used in narratives, descriptions, or conversations, and it is predominantly teacher-initiated and directed, with little opportunity for student creativity and little attention to individual interests. More importantly, TPR promotes only the learners' receptive language skills and ignores the productive ones, which are essential to real communication.

After a few weeks, some students spontaneously begin to give commands to each other. This indicates readiness for a gradual evolution from the receptive to the productive mode. At this point, TPR-Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 1997) provides easy-to-follow guidelines for further progress towards more complex levels of language proficiency.

What is TPR-S?

The storytelling strategies of TPR-S utilize the vocabulary taught in the earlier stage by incorporating it into stories that the learners hear, watch, act out, retell, revise, read, write, and rewrite. Subsequent stories introduce additional vocabulary in meaningful contexts. The children are already familiar with stories from other school and preschool experiences, and now they are exposed to this familiar genre as the teacher presents it in a new language with an abun-

dance of gestures, pictures, and other props to facilitate comprehension. After hearing a story, various students act it out together or assume different roles while their peers watch. The teacher may retell the story with slight variations, replacing one character with another, and engaging different students in the acting. Another technique introduces some conversational skills, as the teacher asks short-answer and open-ended questions such as "Is the cat hungry?", "Is the dog big or little?", and "Where does the girl live?" (Marsh, 1996).

Students are not required to memorize the stories; on the contrary, they are encouraged to construct their own variations as they retell them to a partner, a small group, or the entire class, using props such as illustrations, toys, and labels. The ultimate goal is to have students develop original stories and share them with others. A whole range of activities may be included, such as videotaping, drama, creating booklets for children in the lower grades, designing bulletin boards, and so forth. At this point TPR-S has much in common with other effective approaches to reading and writing instruction.

Both TPR and TPR-S are examples of language teaching as an interactive learner-centered process that guides students in understanding and applying information and in conveying messages to others. TPR as well as TPR-S apply Cummins' (1989) interactive pedagogy principle. At first the children interact silently with the teacher and indicate comprehension by executing commands and then by acting out stories. They are active participants long before they are able to verbally communicate with the teacher and with each other.

TPR as well as TPR-S also apply some of Krashen's (1985) most valuable pedagogical principles. The learners' affective filter is kept at a low level by a relaxed classroom atmosphere, where the stress of performing and being judged is kept to a minimum. At the beginning of the storytelling stage, the students' initial response is not oral, but kinesthetic: When they begin to speak, the teacher responds to the content of their messages rather than to their grammatical accuracy. In TPR as well as in TPR-S the teacher provides comprehensible input without using L1; she relies on the learners' preexisting knowledge of the world and uses gestures, actions, pictures, and objects to demonstrate how one can talk about it in another language.

TPR and TPR-S also make abundant use of the pedagogical strategy of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986). The teacher or a peer assists the learner during tasks that could not yet be performed without help. The scaffold is removed as soon as it becomes unnecessary; new support is then made available for the next challenge. Cooperative learning can be seen as a particular kind of scaffolding provided within a group where students help each other (Steward, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

How can TPR-S promote Native language learning?

Materials and guides for TPR-S are available for teaching Spanish, French, German, and English as a Second Language. The procedures outlined in these sources could be adapted to the teaching of any language, including Native

American ones, if educators, school districts, and community members wanted to engage in such a project.

Several Native American teachers and teacher-trainers have created TPR lessons to introduce their tribal language to the children who have not learned it at home, and these efforts are usually very successful; they allow the learners to indicate comprehension non-verbally, keeping the affective filter low. However, these TPR strategies develop receptive language skills and ignore the productive ones.

Many Native children can understand their tribal language because they hear it spoken at home. These children can be very useful during TPR lessons, acting as assistants, demonstrators, and group leaders. There is reason to rejoice over the fact that they can understand their elders and appreciate their teachings and stories, but what will happen a few years from now when the old people are gone and these children are grown up and should carry on the task of culture transmission? If they can understand but not speak the tribal language, how are they going to teach it to the next generation?

This situation is especially serious in the case of languages such as Hopi or Zuni that are spoken only in a particular community, whose members cannot import speakers from other parts of the world, a choice which is available to Hispanics, Slovenes, Chinese, and other groups. It is essential that Native children learn to use their tribal language instead of just understanding it. In some cases, their reluctance to speak may be owing not only to the pressures of an English-speaking society but also to unreasonable expectations of correctness and accuracy. Children who have suffered ridicule or embarrassment because they mispronounced or misused a word are likely to avoid the risk of further unpleasantness and take refuge in silence. This problem was brought up repeatedly during the First and Second Symposia on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages (Cantoni, 1996), and it was recommended that all attempts to use the home language be encouraged and rewarded but never criticized.

The increasing scarcity of Native-language speakers has assigned the responsibility of Native language instruction to the school, instead of the home or community. When the Native language teacher is almost the only source of Native language input, and the instruction time allocated to Native language teaching is limited, the learners are not to blame for their limited progress in fluency and accuracy.

In addition, Native children face a more severe challenge than English-speaking children who are learning French or Spanish. Research indicates that the extent to which comprehensible input results in grammatical accuracy depends not only on the quantity, quality, and frequency of available input, but on the "linguistic distance" between the learners' L1 and the target L2 (Ringbom, 1987). There is evidence that students learning Spanish through TPR-S made high scores on national grammar tests, but Spanish is an Indo-European language, just like English, whereas Native American languages have grammatical systems unrelated to those of English.

Consequently, Native language teachers who expect their students, or at least some of them, to master the tribal language at a level of correctness that will satisfy the most exacting local standards should provide them appropriate guidance, not just input. As Rivers (1994) has pointed out, there is a crucial difference between comprehension and production. The meaning that a learner constructs from input is drawn from semantic clues and is not stored in memory in its full syntactic complexity. It is possible to comprehend and remember input with little attention to syntax by relying on preexisting knowledge, context, and vocabulary (Van Dijk & Kirtsch, 1983). This phenomenon is known as "selective listening" and often occurs even when the teacher responds to an ungrammatical utterance with one that models the correct form (Van Patten, 1985). This kind of polite error correction, which is recommended for interactive journals, does not necessarily work all the time for all learners; teachers might need to resort to other forms of intervention, such as those described in the literature on the writing process.

In conclusion, educators interested in developing a Native language program or modifying their existing one could explore what TPR-S has to offer for their particular situation. TPR-S consultants could be hired by a school district to work with Native language speakers in developing materials and lesson plans similar to those used for teaching Spanish or ESL.

TPR-S evolved from the grassroots efforts of interested and creative teachers rather than from the application of theoretical models. Its reputation has spread by word-of-mouth, from one satisfied practitioner to another, from one school to the next (Marsh, 1997). Training new personnel to use this methodology is not difficult or excessively time-consuming.

TPR-S emphasizes a positive, collaborative, and supportive classroom climate in which Native American children can develop increasingly complex skills in speaking, reading, and writing their tribal language. In addition, the stories, illustrations, and audio cassettes students can produce in TPR-S are a valuable addition to the scarce pool of Native-language materials available today.

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